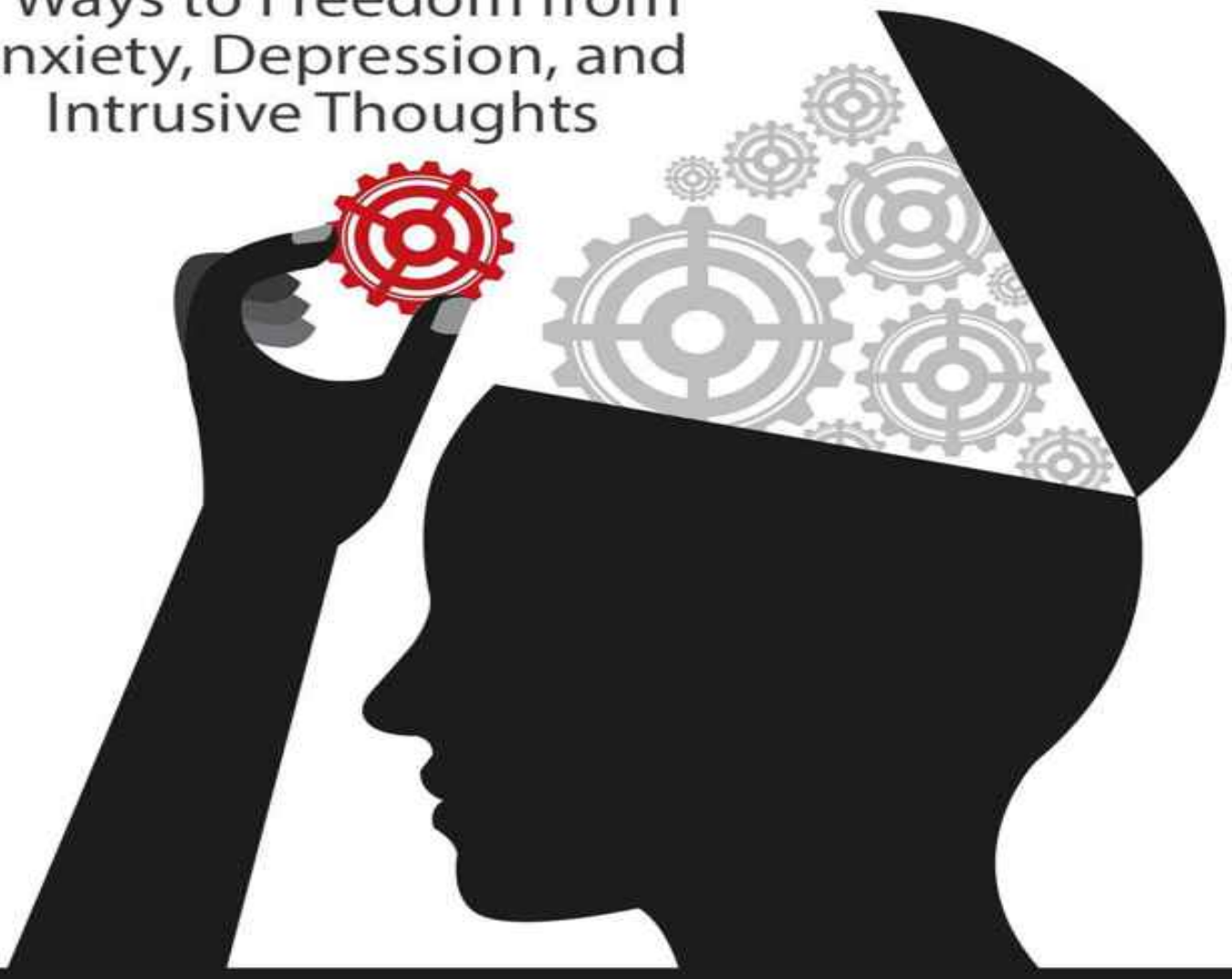
COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

7 Ways to Freedom from Anxiety, Depression, and Intrusive Thoughts



LAWRENCE WALLACE

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Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

7 Ways To Freedom From Anxiety, Depression, And Intrusive Thoughts

Introduction

Thanks and *bravo* for downloading, "*Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: 7 Ways to Freedom from Anxiety, Depression, and Intrusive Thoughts*".

Let's find the right "Cog" for your machine! The brain is a physical object, like a computer or a car engine, and with the right mental practice (the right "cog"), put into action at the right time (changing mental states, or "gears"), your machine (the brain) can function with more ease, efficiency, and contentment.

This book is a *user's manual* for your machine. Except, this '*machine'* is the most important thing in your life. It's the engine providing every conscious experience you have, day and night, from cradle to grave. It's the single most mysterious and complex 3-lb piece of fatty-tissue in the universe: the thing behind your eyes: the human brain. We all have one, (*most of us, anyway*), and it's the determining factor in everything we care about. For example, a good or bad relationship is a by-product of two healthy and happy minds harmoniously interacting – *or not*. The reason you sprung out of bed this morning, or were reluctant to face the day, has a lot to do with the state of your brain, which can be greatly improved for your benefit!

This book is aimed at improving your mental health based on the best CBT science, Stoic and Buddhist wisdom, and practical exercises. These **tried and tested** disciplines have been brought together into ***7 practical ways*** for long-term health and happiness.

The fact you've searched "*cognitive behavioral therapy*" in Amazon – and have then committed to reading this far –means you realize ***taking action*** is necessary for improved mental health. This is a reassuring example of your self-awareness and intelligence, which are great allies for better mental health.

Thanks again for downloading this book! Let’s get on enjoying more peace, happiness, and *freedom*!

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Understand the Obstacles in Your Life

Embrace Your Fate in a Loving Way

Turn Tragedy into Triumph

Open to Change, Discover Wisdom, and Let Go

Wise Discernment: Good or Bad Advice?

Perform Experiments in the Mind's Laboratory

Being *the Mountain* for Family, Friends, Community, and Humanity

Conclusion

How to Understand the Obstacle in Your Life

Originally created for treating depression, cognitive behavioral therapy, commonly referred to as CBT, is a form of psychotherapy used to treat disturbing mental conditions.

CBT radically changes negative thinking patterns and unhelpful behaviors using a mixture of simple behavioral techniques. The different conditions effectively treatable using CBT include; depression, anxiety, chronic stress, eating disorders, intrusive thoughts, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), addiction issues, lack of self-esteem, and mood instability. CBT has been scientifically proven to effectively treat these issues.

CBT is not one unitary thing; rather, it’s a set of therapies jelling to cure most mental conditions and disorders. It’s through the practical application of this process that you understand, embrace, and overcome mental obstacles. This book is designed to give you workable techniques that will assist you to become more skillful at dealing with disturbing thoughts and behaviors.

To get started learning CBT, let’s first understand what might be limiting your progress to a healthier, happier mind.

What's Limiting You?

The important first step is to recognize the current obstacle you face. This might be anxiety, depression, chronic stress, or any specific disorder you feel is a detriment to your happiness. (Remember, mental obstacles have more power outside the light of awareness, so let's shine a light on them, stop *running away*, and see them directly.) Once you've identified the obstacle, accepted the obstacle as *real (*but not necessarily *true*), and have become determined to find a solution – you're already well on your way to mental and emotional freedom.

With the help of some very useful CBT techniques, you will begin to understand the particulars of your condition. You will see your condition as temporary, recognize its changing nature, and see the possibility for significant improvements. It's also important to realize that many issues people feel alone with are actually quite common.

"*Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them*." – **Henry David Theroux**.

This need no longer be the case, as people (like yourselves) who seek self-help, will surely find a way. Let's discover how you can recognize common hindrances.

How to Realize the Hindrance

CBT is rooted in the idea that thoughts determine behavior. If you're acting out negative behaviors; it's because of negative thoughts. Moreover, CBT experts and numerous scientific studies substantiate a direct correlation between thoughts and resulting (*predictable)* behaviors. On one level, it's simply common sense. But understood on a deeper, more profound level, we begin to understand the power and utility of *consciously cultivating healthier thoughts*. What does this mean in practical terms? It means improving our conditioned thought patterns is a gradual process:

"*Drop by drop the water pot is filled. Likewise, the wise man, gathering it little by little, fills himself with good*." – **The Buddha** (verse 122 of the Dhammapada).

Therefore, like ancient Buddhist wisdom, CBT is about a gradual process of moving our lives in the direction of better health consistently over sustained periods of time.

The mental-behavioral link can be found in a wide range of issues. For example, those with anorexia nervosa, (an eating disorder wherein people become malnourished), likely have developed destructive thoughts relating to self-image. Similarly, those who suffer with chronic depression usually have unhealthy expectations, or extremely critical self-judgements, which lead to mental and emotional suffering. As you can see, a very strong link exists between thoughts, feelings, and resulting behaviors. Therefore, for these techniques to be effective, it's important to take an *active interest* in observing, understanding, and taking action to improve our habitual thought patterns in a curious, but non-judgmental way.

The Link between Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviours

Let's look again at how we cultivate a deep understanding of the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The subtle interplay between these factors are what CBT examines in an effort to achieve a better understanding, leading to better solutions.

Thoughts are intimately tied to emotions. Thoughts can trigger a chain reaction of *emotive-associations* in your brain. The more these emotive-association pathways are repeated, the stronger and more persistent the link between a particular thought and emotion becomes. There are two sayings in the neuroscience community:

1) *"If you don't use them [synapses], you lose them."*

This first statement is reassuring for those wishing to let go of unpleasant thoughts and emotions. Time is a great healer because thoughts naturally fade and disappear unless maintained by repetitive thinking. Time's healing ability comes from the law of *entropy*, which acts on everything in the universe, including the human brain. Entropy is a physical law in science and it explains why things change. One of the most empowering things to remember when facing any obstacle is *impermanence*. (When facing troubling times, say to yourself "this too shall pass", and you will find it does.) The natural process of entropy encourages us to forget unhelpful thoughts and feelings, freeing us to the possibility of becoming happier and healthier people in the future. This is the process of change, the fading away.

"It is not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not." **— Thích Nhất Hạnh** (Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet and peace activist)

This process requires *zero* effort from us; in fact, the more we accept and allow thoughts to fade away naturally (without conscious interference), the better we can clear our minds of unhelpful thoughts or unpleasant emotions. Nature has a built in renewal system that we need only *allow* to happen.

2) "*Those that fire together, wire together.*" **– Donald Hebb FRS** (the influential psychologist who coined this phrase, now nicknamed 'Hebb's Law')

This second statement reveals the path to training ourselves for happiness. The human brain has an amazing ability to create, cultivate, and sustain neural connections (*synapses*), the roads between thoughts and emotions. Through deliberate practice we can develop our brains to incline towards wholesome, healthy, and happy mental states. Just as we can promote better physical health through exercise, we can increase the health of our minds through regular practice. In essence, happiness becomes an (easy to maintain) habit, as we gain a *disposition* to good. The brain is always a work in progress, as we sculpt our futures by sculpting our minds.

Gain Resilience, Let Go of Control!

Thoughts can be pleasant or unpleasant, but it's our *relationship* to thoughts that's important – not the *content* of a thought. We cannot control what automatically pops up in our minds. But we always have a choice whether to *invest* in (think more about), or *reject* (acknowledge, but not identify with), a thought. For example, you might see a chocolate cake > leading to a memory of having eaten a chocolate cake before > transporting you to a specific time and place in your past > this could be an unhappy place where cravings for unhealthy foods were used as an emotional distraction > leading you *down the rabbit-hole* of emotive-associations. Thought associations are unconscious and happen in a matter of seconds. However, there is a gap between stimulus (the chocolate cake) and response (our personal *interpretation* of chocolate cake). In one scenario, we might believe chocolate cake really will improve our mood. In another, we *pause*, understanding this is only a temporary solution with potentially negative consequences. The opportunity for *wise discernment* about what to do next is in this stimulus-response gap. The best way to begin intercepting and challenging negative thought patterns is to increase the time between stimulus and response, becoming less *reactive* (operating on our first automatic and conditioned thoughts) and more *responsive* (applying conscious, deliberate awareness to thoughts). This requires courage and patience as we allow automatic thoughts to pass by without reacting to them.

For another example, let's imagine a boss harshly criticizes your work. This criticism could cause you to feel worthless or inadequate. When ruminating on these thoughts, it strengthens neural pathways associated between the stimulus (the harsh criticism) and reaction (critical self-judgment). Obsessive rumination will likely *exaggerate* and increase the suffering, possibly resulting in depression and despondency with regards to your work-life. This reaction becomes a bad habit through lack of awareness and repetition. The trick is to avoid using analytical thinking to *'think your way out'* of a negative thought pattern, as you're really *insidiously* making it stronger. Conversely, in another scenario, you might experience the same stimulus re: your boss harshly criticizing your work, but decide to respond more *deliberatively*. In this case, you begin to look deeper into alternative meanings or interpretations – perhaps your boss is having personal

problems at home, hasn't slept or ate properly, or even had a minor accident on the way to work… ad infimum. These factors are all *out of your control* and have no true relationship to your capabilities. Secondly, having taken the time to consider an appropriate and empowering response, you may instead decide to increase your productivity and work much harder, using your boss's chastisement to your advantage. We've all heard of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but some have post-traumatic *growth* (PTS*G*). This concept was recently further developed by Nassim Taleb and named '*Antifragility':*

"Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better." — **Nassim Nicholas Taleb,** *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder.*

The association between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can be moved from an innate negativity-bias toward the positive and progressive end of the spectrum. It's important to understand that the human brain has evolved to survive and thrive, but not necessarily to be happy or fix itself (this is where conscious training comes in). For example, a scenario in which someone appreciates your work could cause the thought: '*you're doing a good job'*. This can be interpreted numerous ways like '*they think I'm doing a good job, which means it's okay to slack off and become lazy now*', or alternatively, '*keep going, my efforts are being recognized! – the more work, the more rewards!*' Therefore, the decisive outcome of any experience comes from our trained *interpretation* of events, which can be directed towards empowering meanings, cultivating healthy emotive-associations. Thought-associations act as a blueprint for the brain on how to react (in a similar scenario) next time. Over a sustained period of time, and with a conscious practice, it becomes easier and simpler to make the right response *automatic* or reflexive. Empowering positive associations become established as a matter of habit.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." – **Aristotle**

Therefore, to understand the obstacle, it's important to see the chain-reaction of associations that pattern our brains for a particular response. This might be quite challenging if a negative thought pattern is deeply entrenched in your mind, but with the help of CBT techniques, and other synergistic practices such as Stoicism, Buddhism, and positive phycology, it's possible to get both immediate results and long-term freedom from the causes of suffering.

#1: CBT Thought Recording Technique

Thought recording is normally the first technique used in most CBT procedures. What's the use of this? Well, thought recording helps you get closer to your problem by identifying destructive thoughts you routinely experience. To exercise it, get a journal and label 'My Thought Log'. Next, use it to pen down your thoughts and their adjacent experiences. Do this when you're feeling depressed, or in circumstances where you experience the urge to do something *reactive*. This helps in two crucial ways **1)** it *objectifies* thoughts as something separate from yourself (a physical thing written in ink on paper) **2)** it *de-personalizes* thoughts as something which can be examined, entertained, but not necessarily accepted or seen as true. This creates some headspace in the mind.

"It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." – **Aristotle**

For instance, if you're struggling with bulimia nervosa, and incessantly feel like devouring or vomiting food, instead of doing that – *interrupt the pattern* – and take out your journal, writing down all relevant thoughts going through your mind at that moment. For example, you start thinking, '*I am extremely unattractive*', or '*people are disgusted with my appearance*.' Pen this down in your journal. (Note how often our thoughts on self-image *change*, one moment we might be feeling very enthusiastic about our looks, the next day we might be indulging self-loathing.) Noticing these inconsistencies helps us undermine thoughts, labeling them as simply

‘*disturbing thoughts’*, and not based on any objective truth. Thoughts are always temporary and only ever exist in our minds!

Similarly jot down all associated thoughts entering (or disturbing) your mind. Regular practice of at least once per-day (20 minutes in the morning or at night is best), but feel free to pick up your journal anytime, making sure it’s readily available for use. It can be useful to keep it in a draw next your bed, with another journal to carry around in your backpack. Ultimately, the more consistent your efforts in recording your thoughts, the better insight you will have in understanding repetitive thinking patterns and neuro-associations.

#2: Go Through Your Thoughts

Once you’re done writing down your feelings, go through them, and read the words aloud, like a critic reading a piece of fiction. Reading negative thoughts aloud can cause a brief sting, as it’s usual to feel quite attached to thoughts. However, regular practice of non-attached self-examination will quickly yield good results. It will help you come to this conclusion: these negative thought patterns are often incoherent, unhealthy, and leading to unnecessary self-destructive habits or behaviors. Secondly, this exercise can help you understand the *discursive* relationship you’re having with yourself. Are you talking to yourself in a compassionate way? Would you speak to a loved friend the way you speak to *yourself*? If not, it’s time to make a change!

If you’ve spent a lot of time lost in thought (*which most of us have*), you may have failed to notice the kinds of habitual thoughts that occupy your mind. These thought patterns may have been repeated so often you’ve begun to feel *synonymous* with these thoughts. This is particularly the case with anxious thoughts, as it’s the nature of the brain (the amygdala), to focus on what it believes are potential threats. Unfortunately, this unconscious part of the brain can discern the difference between internal and external, true or false – and it simply sounds the *panic alarm* – and further grooves the anxious connection. Conversely, mindful awareness can act like a *guardian* in the mind. It’s part of the cerebral cortex (the most recently evolved part of the brain), which has authoritative control and can *intercept* feelings and thoughts by simply becoming aware of them.

Understand that resisting thoughts, or *craving* better thoughts, can result in a negative cycle of discontentment. This state of either burying unwanted thoughts or chasing pleasant thoughts implies that the current situation – the present moment – is in some way not enough. However, if we allow the waters of our inner mind to become still, and simply accept things as they are, a natural feeling of contentment and clarity emerges. When thoughts become overwhelming a very useful technique is to simply '*note'* negative thinking when it occurs, without over-analysis or trying to get to the bottom of what a thought might *mean*, as *thinking-our-way-out* of a problem can often exaggerate the problem.

Now you're seeing your thoughts mindfully, notice specific themes, or recurring thoughts. Some disturbing thoughts can be very persistent. However, these thoughts can be undermined with a skillful and rational analysis (again, avoid *over*-analysis or thinking), and even *pruned* out of existence, or at least de-venomed, with a regular '*noting'* practice (i.e. identifying a thought as just a thought and not reality), and letting go (not ruminating).

#3: Thank Yourself and Dig Deeper

Write down '*Thank you for bringing this to my wiser attention*' next to all the important thoughts and themes. Doing this, you will begin cultivating a feeling of gratitude for your wise and compassionate awareness. This helps us see thoughts without accepting them, establishing an easy-control as we practice simply being with difficult thoughts and emotions with a balanced mind. Many people experience a strong sense of aversion, or a desire to simply *rid* themselves of unpleasant thoughts, which actually negatively reinforces them.

Next, notice the potential *causes* for suffering, either internally or externally. Dig deeper into thoughts with an open and allowing mind. Discover the *story* about how these thoughts begun, why they continue to have an effect, and confront with courage what you're really afraid of. Then go right to the start of this thinking pattern, examine the *story* again non-judgmentally, and question how things have changed and developed since this pattern of thinking began. Remember, no two people respond to a thought (or a traumatic situation) the same; whatever you're telling yourself

about it is an opinion and a perspective – not an objective truth. Nobody is born with negative thoughts; nobody is an anxious or depressed person. These are simply *temporary* states of mind that we experience more or less frequently throughout our lives.

'*Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.'* **– Marcus Aurelius**

Okay, now write down exactly how this issue developed overtime up to the present moment, and what might have contributed to it becoming stronger or weaker over time. The original *'event'* could be an act of bullying, an act of neglect, abuse, violence, an internal shift or breakdown. Whatever it is, see it clearly written down (preferably with pen and paper).

Once you've identified the '*trigger'*, remind yourself that whatever happened was not ultimately your fault. It was certainly a combination of factors that caused the situation to occur; the particular people involved (and their mental states), the particular time, age, and period in your life, as well as the specific environment or circumstances. The truth is that misfortune can befall anyone, but in order to live a healthy life, you need to *decide* to live with total acceptance and self-compassion. This way of being in the world will empower you to be of service to others, give your life meaning and direction, as you contribute to the happiness and well-being of others (who have surely had their own misfortunes – *we all have*). You have the right to live a healthy, honest, and happy life, but only you can give yourself *permission* to use this right.

"*Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own unguarded thoughts.*" **– The Buddha**

Persistent practice over many months and years will have a tremendous effect. The habits of examining thoughts mindfully, not clinging to them with an overactive mind, and letting them go non-judgmentally can transform an unhappy life into a happy one. This journaling practice is a great way to get a solid grasp on slippery thoughts. So, *take action*, and

begin the healing process this very moment. Live with courage, freedom, and happiness now!

The next stage after having raised awareness about anxious, depressive, or intrusive thoughts is to actually *embrace* them fully. This is explored in the next chapter…

Embrace Your Fate in a Loving Way

CBT has lot in common with Stoic philosophy and Buddhist practice. In all three we see that to effectively treat a mental condition we must do something unintuitive – we must face our fears *head-on* in order to let them go. This process becomes easier once we've understood the true *unsubstantial* nature of thoughts, which are often just intense feelings in the moment, or a piece of language, or flashing imagery. It's the relationship we have to these thoughts and feelings that define whether they pass-by with ease or torment us for years. This embrace or total acceptance of ourselves can be understood as – *amor fati (*a Latin phrase popular among ancient stoic philosophers which translates as '*a love of fate'*).

Let's find out what practical CBT techniques we can apply to help us embrace our fate in a loving way.

Embracing Your Obstacles

Embracing obstacles means gradually opening to difficult feelings, disturbing thoughts, pain, and dissatisfaction when they naturally arise. It's important to not to *chase* after thoughts or artificially recreate traumatic experiences, over and over again. This is equivalent to watching a bad movie, over and over again. It's normal, especially with anxiety, to repeat negative thoughts, as our brains have been wired to unconsciously focus on potential threats (which was useful for ancient *homo sapiens* when running from hungry predators).

Ok, so allowing thoughts to come and go naturally is helpful for mental health. The best analogy I've heard to explain why opening to negative feelings when they arise is from Dr. Rick Hanson, (New York Times best-selling author) who describes negative feelings like someone knocking at your door, but when nobody answers, what do they do? They keep on *knocking*! Only when you open the door (paying attention to the feelings) does the knocking stop and peace prevail.

Therefore, not only must we not chase thoughts, but we must not neglect, ignore their existence, or push them away, either. This encourages us to embrace our personal obstacles with honesty and courage. An insidious problem comes when we try to mask our feelings with *external* solutions, such as alcohol, sex, drugs, gambling, or any other addictive distraction. These '*solutions'* aren't really solutions at all, as they can only ever be a temporary diversion from how we're feeling. In many cases, these external factors just make life more complicated, clouding the real truth and interrupting the natural healing, which comes from embracing ourselves with honest, loving attention.

Exposure Therapy Technique

Exposure therapy is an amazing technique in CBT, which entails exposing a person to the object, situation, or context that they fear most. This works on the widely proven theory that gradual exposure to the fear reduces over-reactivity to it over the long-term. This is the process of fear-*inoculation*, giving ourselves a small, manageable dose of fear makes us better prepared for it next time it arises.

"*Those who are easily shocked should be shocked more often.*" **– Mae West**

So how does this work? Well, this technique has a basis in respondent conditioning: Step 1) identify the condition or emotion, Step 2) notice how the *stimulus* causes physiological arousal in your body and mind, Step 3) write down the experience immediately after the exposure, Step 4) evaluate how your reaction *changes* after repeated exposure (typically, anxiety will reduce over time). These are the first steps to breaking the *escape*-pattern that maintains and feeds the fear. The aim of this approach is, through concentrated exposure therapy, you will begin to desensitize yourself to a specific fear-inducing situation. So how can you make this practically work? Well, there are different ways to practice…

"I see you over there, Mara. Come, let's have some tea.' **– The Buddha** (confronting 'Mara' = 'hatred, greed, and delusion)

Let's dissect commonly used kinds of exposure therapies, performing the one which bests suits our particular fear, and helps us embrace life more fully.

#1 Real Life, or *In Vivo*, Technique

The real life or in vivo exposure technique is where you make a deliberate effort to seek out the actual stimuli that activates your fear. For example, if you are dealing with social anxiety disorder (you fear socializing with

people face to face), then the goal is to gradually expose yourself by meeting new people. This might mean attending a big party, and interacting with a few people as a way to face-and-embrace your fear. Similarly, if you fear heights, make the decision to stand on top of a tall building in a nearby city, and openly face your phobia as a way to overcome it. This technique works particularly well when you *declare* your intention on social media to friends and acquaintances: social-pressure is our friend!

To practice the real-life exposure technique, here is what you must do:

1. **First, in a journal, jot down the activity or situation that sets off your fear. Describe it in detail and write down how you would feel on encountering your fear. Then, on a scale of 1 to 100, rate the fear attached to the stimulus.**
2. **Next, arrange a situation that exposes you to your fear. For this step, you can seek the help of a supportive person (or not). Ask that person to accompany you, but to keep his or her distance, so you can embrace your fear alone. However, he or she should be quick to intervene if things become too overwhelming. (Remember, gradual, *incremental* exposure is best.)**
3. **Before encountering your fear, write down your *pre*-stimulus thoughts. How are you feeling now that you're about to face fear head-on? How is your body responding physically? Are you mentally *rehearsing* worst-case scenarios? What is going on in your mind? Write down the answers to these questions and more.**
4. **Next, face your phobia and the condition that normally activates the fear reaction. Make a conscious decision to withstand that stimulus for at least 10 minutes. Say aloud: *'I will do it, and be better for the experience'* to keep yourself motivated.**
5. **Congratulations! After you've faced it, describe the scenario in your journal, along with all the feelings you experienced upon exposure to the stimulus, and then rate your feelings from complete contentment to extreme panic and anxiety (1 to 10). If the before and after rating are almost similar, this is an indication that the intensity of your feelings will decrease if you**

continue exposing yourself to your fears. Remember, this is a practice and there are no *right* reactions; all reactions are self-experiments and opportunities to learn more about ourselves.

You can use this very effective technique to radically accept and embrace the obstacle. Practice this technique as many times as you feel will be helpful. Once the exposure therapy has finished, let go of the results, and practice living life without the fear.

#2 Situation Exposure Therapy Technique

The situation exposure therapy technique is similar to real-life exposure therapy, with the only difference being that this technique makes use of a situation instead of real life exposure.

It involves placing on your list things that you would normally avoid. For instance, if you have an eating disorder, you have to prepare a list of all prohibited foods. Put these foods into a hieratical list of *intensity* of the emotional impact, putting a short sentence next to the item of food explaining why this particular food triggers you. This can be done on a scale of scale from 1 to 10; the ranking depends on how you'd feel if you actually ate the item on the list.

For instance, you could rate chocolate cake ten, and full cream milk two or three. Next, organize the list in a descending order, moving from highest to the lowest. The theme's list will clearly reflect your issue.

List items at different distress numbers to minimize any big leaps; the goal is to work your way through this list, moving from the lowest to the highest. Experiment with every item numerous times for a week or two until the distress associated with that object reduces to about 50 percent. For instance, if you became 30 percent distressed on drinking full cream milk, after experimenting with it for a short time, you might be able to bring this down to a 10-15 percent distress.

This technique helps you understand the condition, and gradually works towards relieving distress.

#3 Imagery-Based Exposure Technique

Imagery based contact therapy involves imagining or recalling a memory that provokes negative emotions. For instance, if you fear facing people due to acute self-consciousness, or worry of being judged, then you have to bring your mind any recent memory that stimulated these negative feelings. For instance, you could recall a time when you faced an authority figure and felt extremely nervous.

When visualizing that memory, carefully focus on it like watching an engaging movie, and recall the sensory details associated to that memory until it becomes clear and vivid in your mind's eye. For instance, recall the authority figure's tone, their countenance, the temperature of the room you were in (the more specific the better). Next, label the thoughts and emotions you experienced at that particular moment. Open to feeling these emotions now in a peaceful, undistracted setting.

For instance, determine whether you became frightened, sad, stressed, anxious, and so on. Describe your behavioral urges, such as the urge to flee the situation, cry, lash-out in anger, or any other similar behavioral impulses. Next, rate the intensity of feelings at different stages of the memory or narrative; the beginning, middle, end, etc.

Afterwards, continue visualizing the memory with a subtle awareness, and notice how your distress levels drop down over time. For example, if your distress level was at a 10 in the beginning, after an hour of visualization, it could drop down to 5.

This procedure helps counteract negative ruminations because it makes the intrusive memories less *reactive*, desensitizing you to the event. This decreases the avoidance coping mechanism, empowering you to embrace your obstacles.

Also, if you would like to go a step further, or perhaps you feel like embracing the memory has been ineffective for you, there is another step: *scrambling*. Scrambling the memory involves replaying the incident in your mind in a cartoonish way. For example, perhaps imagining everyone involved having exaggerated features; long noses, elf like ears – the sillier the better! This reminds you that this experience only exists in the *memory* now – the theatre of your mind. Now try speeding up the memory as if in super fast-forward mode. Then try changing the pitch to high and squeaky. This begins to *scramble* your memory into a humorous farce, loosening up

your *interpretation* of what happened. This makes our perspective more fluid on what really happened. It's also reminds us on a conscious level that this is not actually happening *now.* It's just a *memory* of an *event* we're able to manipulate, distort, and forget about in this moment and others. This technique is taught by Tony Robbins in '*Awaken the Giant Within'* for those interested in learning more.

Practice all three exposure therapy techniques, or any one of the three (whichever you find most suitable) to move a step closer to improving your current and temporary condition.

Turn Tragedy into Triumph!

Many of our treasured artists from Nobel Prize winning playwright Samuel Beckett, to the unique vocalist Amy Winehouse, have turned adversity into advantage. In the case of Beckett, he called his most creative and depressive period 'the siege in the room'. One stormy night, standing on the end of a peer in Dublin, he realized that the "dark he had struggled to keep under" was a resource for strength. Beckett summed it up saying, "*I shall always be depressed, but what comforts me is the realization that I can now accept this dark as the commanding side of my personality. In accepting it, I will make it work for me.*" This highlights the importance of step **1)** understanding ourselves, and **2)** accepting ourselves compassionately. However, the 3rd step is radically empowering, as we learn to turn situations on their head, finding the unique possibility for triumph in tragedy.

"You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength."

– Marcus Aurelius (Ancient Roman Emperor: the most powerful person on the planet from 161 to 180 AD)

This empowering perspective is achieved through consistent practice. The more we get knocked down by the challenges of life, the stronger we become in the act of picking ourselves up after every fall. This is more than just an academic or philosophical piece of advice – it's a practical *practice* for finding our greatest strengths in the midst of our greatest struggles. This is about developing a non-reactive mind that can choose the best response for any given situation. Who has more power over your life today? The multitude of people fate has decided you're to share this life with - or are *you* the ultimate captain of your fate? The master of your mind, and therefore, your destiny? It's important never to blame others for the way

we’re feeling, or the way our life has played out. It may be true that others have played an influential factor in shaping our lives, and even our thoughts. But we must learn to take the steering wheel of our minds, knowing that we cannot control who else is on the road, but we can control the direction of our own thoughts and behaviors.

“We can choose to throw stones, to stumble on them, to climb over them, or to build with them.” **— William Arthur Ward**

Here’s how you can accomplish anything…

How to Turn Threats into Opportunities

It's important to notice the difference between our *perception* of threats, and the (objective) *observation* of what's really happening. This is the beginning of self-knowledge and mindfulness. This involves noticing every time we're telling a story about what happening without connecting to the real situation at hand. This *story* is based on concepts, which are (*at best*) an approximation or a summary of what's really happening in the moment. The truth is the reality of any situations is always subtler and more nuanced than our stories can account for. Mindfulness is a way for us to connect directly with our senses, to open to new information about the world, and to reconnect with its ever changing nature.

"The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it." **– Marcus Aurelius**

It's through the practical practice of bringing our experience into closer register with reality that we learn to let go of our stories, particularly our disempowering stories, by seeing them as just that – *stories*, and not the truth of things.

It's highly recommended that you acquire a daily meditative practice (and/or a journaling practice) in order to reliably reconnect with our inner truth, and the *relationship* this has to the outer truth.

"Don't believe everything you think. Thoughts are just that - thoughts."

—Allan Lokos (founder and guiding teacher of the Community Meditation Center located on New York City's upper west side)

The gain a deeper insight we must avoid the desire to escape negative thoughts (*through the many distractions of modern life*) as well as disturbing emotions when they arise in daily life. Please understand that negative feelings are inevitable; they are signals to your conscious brain

that something needs attention. This self-exploration can be accomplished through the development of courage and equanimity, as we learn to answer this call from deep within our psyche.

A study carried out by researchers at the Olin University proved that if you are comfortable experiencing, as well as expressing mixed emotions, then you are likely to experience improvements in your emotional and mental well-being. On the other hand, *evading* or *covering* (the emotion of shame) your negative feelings does not result in any improvement. Instead, it aggravates these feelings. Therefore, it's important to make sense of experiences that have a mixture of sadness and happiness, allowing you to effectively experience emotions, even to your advantage.

Jonathan Adler, a psychology professor working at Olin University stated that understanding negative feelings, accepting them, and making the right use of them improves mental well-being. Therefore, to turn tragedy into triumph, embrace even the most disturbing emotions with the virtues of courage and equanimity: then you're free to convert them into something positive. Let's look at a CBT technique that can help you with this task.

How to Change Negative Emotions into Positive Ones

A study conducted recently by researchers at the Ghent University examined the regular habits of about 100 innovative professionals. The study concluded that professionals who started their day with negative emotions, but finished it with healthy ones experienced the most creative output, and their most productive and efficient days were the ones that started with some type of negativity.

This does not mean you need to be forcefully negative at the start of your day. It simply means that you need to channel negativity into positive activities similar to what these professionals did. This will increase your effectiveness at completing your goals and moving through life positively. This is about setting yourself inspiring goals, but offsetting them with realistic and even negative emotions. Through doing this you will be prepared to confront obstacles in your life and thrive in spite of them. Here's how to change negative emotions into positive ones.

1. **Use Negative Emotions as Fuel: Perceive negative emotions such as anger or depression as a form of fuel you must burn during the course of the day, using this fuel to do something positive. For example, you're first reaction at being denied to speak at a convention could be anger or frustration, use these emotions as a source of motivation. Burn this anger by doing something useful and productive, turning your energy outward, as these emotions can become toxic if ignored or turned negatively inward. A good idea in the above instance may be using the anger to write a speech and then present it at a webinar. This way, you will be utilizing your negative emotion for something positive and increasing your productivity in the same breath. David Burkus, author of 'Myths of Creativity' validates this technique by stating that returning to a challenging problem when you are feeling hopeless or angry is the best time to enhance your output.**
2. **Change Shame into Kindness: If you're experiencing shame and this feeling deeply humiliates you, convert it into compassion. Normally, we tend to experience shame when we**

try hiding our flaws or avoiding our fears. To turn this emotion into something positive, build greater connections and association with others. This helps you become kind towards yourself, as well as others. Brene Brown, author of 'Daring Greatly' states that shame increases when you isolate yourself, but it can never survive empathy, which is why you need to be around people and be compassionate towards them to overcome this feeling. It's also important to realize *shame* is almost never a helpful emotion and is best switched to guilt. Why? Because guilt implies the opportunity for change and self-improvement. Whereas, shame implies an inward self-loathing which serves no other purpose than self-pity. Self-compassion when dealing these emotions is vital, as it allows us to forgive ourselves and others and move forward more easily. It reveals insight into how other might be feeling, giving us a better perspective on life and those around us.

3. **Turn Loss into Gratitude: Another negative emotion we tend to go through when suffering from a mental or emotional disorder is loss. The feeling of losing something important can be extremely painful. However, it's also important to celebrate, especially when it's *the life* of a loved one. This means not seeing their passing as the most important thing about their life, but instead seeing the totality of their human life, focusing on what a wonderful experience it is to be human; to love, to enjoy, to breath. It's often wisest to simply realize that everything – *everything* – is impermanent, and that our loved ones would encourage us to continue living life fully. Gratitude for lives past, present, and future are the way to keep a wise and empowering perspective.**

   Also, recognize the '*silent gifts*' and small things of life, which really add up to making our lives life rich and enjoyable. Lynne Hughes, creator of the Comfort Zone Camp for Grieving Children says that losing her parents at a very young age helped her realize and appreciate all the other gifts she had. In fact, because of that loss, she channeled her loss into *gratitude*

and used it to make her life healthier, more appreciative and happier.

Open to Change, Discover Wisdom, and Let Go

Now we've begun to master our emotions, and maybe use them in creative ways, such as writing, music, poetry, business, physical exercise, or any other good effort. It's time to finally acknowledged the fact that our thoughts, emotions, and our lives are *always changing*. I've simplified the essential wisdom of from philosophy, spirituality, and cognitive science into a basic equation. This equation is a guide for how to deal with any situation in life.

The Freedom Equation

Full-Engagement + Non-Attachment = *Freedom*

This concept is a recipe for how to handle our day-to-day lives. Yes, we can engage and embrace our emotions to our advantage, as described in the previous chapter. However, after we have attended to our emotions, it's important to *let them go* in order to welcome the new. There is an important difference between *de*tachment and *non*-attachment. Detachment implies a pulling away or aversion to certain thoughts and feelings, whereas *non*-attachment is about not *clinging* any particular thought or sensation. Anxious thoughts often take the form of automatic or reactive thoughts. Negative thinking often occurs in the form of repetitive and unhelpful thinking. The common belief is to believe we're able to analyze or reason our way out thoughts. In truth, this only serves to strengthen neuronal pathways associated with these thoughts. Overanalyzing is common among those suffering with anxiety, depression, and intrusive thoughts. But the good news is with committed *practice* anyone can break this loop of negative-automatic-thoughts and develop a wiser relationship with their

internal dialogue. Please **be kind to yourself** and remember negative thinking is just a bad habit, which must be replaced by practicing good thought *hygiene*! Just as we practice good oral hygiene automatically by brushing our teeth, we can automatically learn to have positive thoughts and a wholesome relationship with ourselves. This is a process that takes time and gentle but sustained effort, as we come to a place of natural positivity.

"The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot." **– Michael Altshuler**

Let's discover the nature of our automatic thinking and practice bringing mindful awareness to more moments of our lives.

Understanding Automatic Thoughts

Many automatic thoughts are deeply engrained, but they're also completely reversible thanks to the *plastic* nature of our brains. The brain is malleable or moldable like a muscle, and is constantly *pruning* synapses (the bridges between neurons) that aren't often used to make way for new thoughts or synapses. The brain is highly adaptable and it's been shown with MRI brain scans that increased blood flow to regions involved with being calm and collected (the cerebral cortex) can increase in volume with practices like mediation. (Tip: Download an App called 'Headspace' and take their free 'Take 10' mediation course on your computer or mobile device – this could be a game changer for you!)

Automatic thoughts pop-up like a spam email without any conscious effort. This is totally normal and happens to practically everyone on a daily basis. The practice of mindfulness is about intercepting and understanding when we're automatically thinking negative thoughts, which leads to negative behavior. Automatic thoughts can be a powerful friend or powerful enemy; it only depends on how you **train** your mind. You can create amazing habits that will transform your life like sleeping at regular hours, making nutritious food choices, and exercising with consistent enthusiasm. However, when thoughts go unchecked we can easily fall into bad habit patterns, which can be very destructive and cause huge regret later in life. Decide today to take control of your daily routines in a positive and *deliberate* way.

Negative thoughts can be imposed on us from experiences. For instance, many people have experienced ridicule and bullying at school, which can leave a person either scarred or defiant, depending on the good or bad information they were exposed to about how to train their minds in interpreting these events. As children, our minds are very receptive and trusting of new information. This makes children more vulnerable to bad ideas or negative conditioning. However, it can also make the same people more compassionate for others who have suffered similar maltreatment in life.

Automatic thoughts can something seemingly benign like the advice "be realistic" when thinking about career choices. These thoughts unexamined can insidiously corrode confidence and hinder creativity. However, wise

discernment (simply looking more closely at thoughts) can reveal whether this is good advice coming from wise experience, or bad advice coming from fear and ignorance.

Automatic thoughts also become automatic because the human mind is incapable of holding a large amounts of information at one time. The brain creates shortcuts or patterns to interpret your individual reality, which it then changes into automatic responses to events. For instance, many drivers do not think twice when making a turn. This is because technicalities related to driving are deep seated deep in the brains automatic response system.

Automatic Thinking VS Rational Thinking:

Although they pose their fair share of advantages, a big problem posed by automatic thoughts is that they hinder rational thinking. There are two systems of the brain as explained by Noble Prize winning behavioral phycologist Daniel Kahneman. ‘System 1’ is our fast acting automatic and reactive brain (controlled by the brains super highway of white matter connections). ‘System 2’ is the slower, more thoughtful, rational brain (made up of grey matter, particularly the dense neurons packed into the cerebral cortex). These two aspects of the brain play very important but distinct roles. As explained before, system 1 thinking improves reaction time to threats and makes habits. But, system 2 is the part of the brain we can use to shape our destiny in a conscious and deliberate way. System 2 type thinking (pausing before we react) is therefore what we would want to train.

The problem with automatic thoughts is they occur so quickly we end up mechanically obeying them. Therefore, to improve cognition and behavior, we must be committed to practicing the more thoughtful aspect of the brain. To achieve this, use the following CBT technique.

Freeing Ourselves from the Negative Thinking Trap

Automatic negative thoughts can trap us in negative thinking patterns, forcing us to experience negativity without conscious realization. To rectify this pattern, it's important to break the cycle and free ourselves of these unconstructive thinking traps. Here's how...

1. **Bring Attention to Self-talk: Start focusing on your self-talk. Self-talk is the background automatic-thinking that we often identify with as our 'Self'. However, when pay clear attention to this inner narrator, we frequently *disagree* with ourselves. This is a bit puzzling as who's right in this situation me or *me*? This is the first step in realizing we're not the voice in our heads, no more than we *are* any particular thought.**

   This inner monologue is highly situation dependent, which means who we think we are *changes*. Notice what thoughts enter or leave the mind when experiencing a stressful situation. Some negative examples of these thoughts include, *'I will never accomplish my goals', 'I won't be happy until [fill in the gap] happens', 'I am not in control of my life', 'I shouldn't think these terrible thoughts', 'I want to die' or 'I'm worthless'*... These thoughts come and go like electrical storms in the mind. Always remind yourself of their impermanence next time they arise. It's even a good idea to see the humor in them, reminding yourself how over-dramatic these thoughts are compared to the relative wealth and comfort we most likely experience.

Whenever you recognize unpleasant thinking patterns don't engage with them, instead **'note'** them with a word or two like "*insecurity*" or "*anxious thinking*". Then consciously feel the subtle emotions and feelings attached to these troubling thoughts, but do so non-judgmentally i.e. without any interpretation, language, or critical thoughts. However, allow any thoughts to naturally arise, examine them, and let them go completely.

2. **Pick Out the *Hot* Thoughts: Next, pick out the hot or most emotionally provocative thoughts from amongst all the thoughts you automatically experience. It's important to be honest and courageous in 'naming' or identifying the fear. This act of awareness alone undermines the '*realness*' of a thought, which like a dream, has no basis outside of our minds. This is the first act in mastering our inner narrative, as we learn to cultivate a wiser relationship to thoughts.**
3. ***Challenge* Negative Thoughts: After identifying that hot thought; jot down evidence supporting the thought, with at least 3 piece of evidence opposing the negative thought. (It's important to have this 3 to 1 ratio of positive evidence if we're to point our mind in the right direction.) Now act like your defense attorney and prosecutor. Start with the evidence supporting that negative thought and rate its emotional intensity. Next, come up with arguments *against* the hot (emotionally provocative) thoughts, and then rate your emotions. Take the time after this exercise to notice whether you're feeling have soften on this topic by exposing weakness in these hot, negative, and disruptive thoughts. Seeing the abundance of arguments against these thoughts on paper can start to break the negative cycle.**

Continue this practice until the arguments against intrusive thoughts are automatic. Overtime the reactivity surrounding these negative thoughts will decrease, until your mind is ready to let go of them. With persistent practice, opening to change, making wise choices, and letting go will become natural.

Wise Discernment: Good or Bad Advice?

"No man was ever wise by chance." **– Seneca the Younger** (Stoic philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and adviser to Emperor Nero – one the most powerful men in the ancient roman empire).

Now we understand the mind a little better and have some practices for how to practically shift our thinking to a better place. The next way forward is to recognize the two ways we experience '*happiness'*. There are two concepts or methods for achieving happiness 1) the remembering self, and 2) the experiencing self. The remembering self is seeking to feel intellectually happy *about* our lives. This is the autobiographical narrative in our minds, the after-the-fact assessment of our lives. Happiness for the remembering self might come from the memory of a business, fitness, or personal achievement. However, the experiencing self is the moment to moment *experience* of life. This sense of self lives only in the present moment. This includes pleasure (or pain) we get from different experiences, as well as the myriad of other possible present-state experiences we have during our lives.

The important thing to remember is to make wise choices as concerns to our happiness. It's now been empirically proven (with American participants, at least) that, with respect to the experiencing self, happiness does not increase on average for people after earning of over $60,000 per year. This reveals a commons sense understanding that lack of money hinders happiness, but having *more than enough* money doesn't actually make us *feel* any happier. This is called the 'hedonistic principle' in psychology. Only in retrospect do we associate more money with more happiness.

It's only too easy to fall into the trap of bad or misguided advice. Again, a good rule of thumb is to question whether what you're pursuing will make *intrinsically* or *extrinsically* happy i.e. happy in *practice* or happy in *theory*. Internal happiness is the more reliable predicator of happiness once our

needs have been met. However, this is not say there isn’t value in doing meaningful things, which are personally challenging, but add value in aggregate. This is where we must have wise, conscious discernment about what makes us happy or adds value to the world, and what is delusional or will makes us unhappy.

How to Differentiate the Good from Bad

"If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable." – ***Seneca the Younger***

It's important to apply rational thinking when conflicted by decisions. Life can be chaotic and full of uncertainty for those without a positive guiding purpose. If we're to skillfully navigate the many influences of life, good or bad, we must have a clear picture of what our final destination could look like. This does not mean we should set unrealistic expectations for our lives, but a wholesome goal can point us in the direction for a fulfilling future.

"A goal is not always meant to be reached, it often serves simply as something to aim at." **– Bruce Lee**.

However, as the above Seneca quote implies, getting this wrong can mean we're lost a sea. There are no clear *maps* in life, only guidelines and best practices. A map, by definition, cannot reflect the full complexity of what it represents, as it's only a representation. Besides, the world, ourselves, and other people are constantly changing. But there are patterns of thoughts and behaviors, which when combined with best practices, help us navigate the world with a clearer picture.

There can be confusion when we're torn between two opposing decisions. Often this comes about when we're torn between hedonistic allures (short term pleasures) and utilitarian or pragmatic concerns (long term well-being). The best piece of advice which serves to give light on this topic is from Seneca:

"*Enjoy pleasures in such a way as not to injure future ones*." **– Seneca the Younger**

This is both a hopeful and a sensible statement. We can have our cake and eat it – in moderation. There is a balance to be struck between our enjoyment of life in the short and long term. But how can we practically distinguish what's going to be good or bad for us? There is no single straight forward answer, but there are best practices as well as tried and tested methods for reducing our mistakes.

Reflect Rationally on the Advice of Others

If you have taken it upon yourself to practice the previous steps and techniques, you are now in a position where you can notice a thought and understand its effects on your mind. Moreover, you are also in a position where you can objectively reflect upon any type of advice coming your way.

Reflecting upon a piece of advice means giving yourself time and space to examine the consequences. Imagine your mind as a compass, at first, a compass often spins before settling on true north. It takes a little time for the needle to settle, and so it is with the mind. Only with patience can the way forward become clear. By allowing our powerful unconscious mind to turn an idea over (in a non-judgmental, non-*forceful* way – we don't *make* the compass point true north) can we have full confidence in the clarity of our decisions. Here's how...

1. **We must accept that people constantly influence us to do things their way. Sometimes a person intensions are in our interests, and at other times we're being misled. The best defense is to pause and reflect before acting. There's rarely a need to respond immediately, and you should be extra vigilant of those putting on the pressure for you to do something. Simply ask that person to allow you some time to think about it. At first, doing so may not be easy, especially if the person *expects* you to bend to their will, but you need to summon up the courage to say it straight, as doing this will bring life back into your control. Also, it will give you time to rationally consider their proposition.**
2. **Next, write down their demand, advice, or suggestion; when alone, repeat the advice to yourself as a question. Don't strive to**

discover the deeper meaning immediately, simply allow the mind to subconsciously assimilate and begin working on it. The unconscious part of our brain is very powerful and can often intuit good or bad advice. Now spend 10 minutes (perhaps set-up a timer for this) in a secluded spot where you won't be distracted. It's important to drop the question into the mind like a pebble into a pond. This exercise is about observing the ripples (the emotional effects) of this piece of advice. It's best to frame the advice as a question, for example: *'would doing [X] improve my life or move me forward positively?'*

3. **Finally, write in two columns the *pro's* and the *con's*. Come up with at least 5 reasons to accept or reject the advice. Then weigh each reason from 1-10 in order of *significance*, which is defined by the happiness or long-term value taking (or *rejecting*) the advice will cause. The act of putting things on paper often brings rational clarity to our decision making. It also allows us to weigh the reasons without being overwhelmed by emotions. Performing this exercise, it's usual for one column to outrank the other – making the right path clear. After which it's all about having the courage to commit to your final rational decision.**

Practice this technique whenever facing important decisions. This practice helps to slow down our thinking process, allowing us to make more considered decisions. Remember, we are the ultimate masters of our destinies, the captains of our lives. It's important to have the courage to say '*yes*', '*no*', or '*give me some time*' whenever necessary. Practice not giving into peer pressure, and people will come to respect you for it. Showing self-respect and discernment about how you spend your time only *increases its value*, which will be likewise appreciated by others in the long term. Happiness is not dependent on the good or bad opinion of others, but instead upon our *actions*.

Observation vs Interpretation

"We are often more frightened than hurt; and we suffer more from imagination than from reality" – **Seneca the Younger**

It's important to realize the universe is neither actively hostile nor favorable to our lives. It's like the ocean and we're the sailors who must adapt to its changing nature. Some days we will be bathed in sunlight and feel in total accordance with nature, and at other times our lives may be dashed against the rocks. To be fully prepared we must follow the advice of the Serenity prayer:

"Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

And Wisdom to know the difference." **– Reinhold Niebuhr**

It's with a state of equanimity we must sail through all weathers, knowing the only certainty is in uncertainty. This is a liberating realization and makes life interesting. It also suggests we, like the ancient Stoics, not take good fortune for granted and work to improve our lives ready for when our fortunes go south (fix the roof while the sun is shining!).

It's crucial to realize the difference between *pain* (which is inevitable), and *suffering* (which is optional). This distinction requires us to be *equanimously* mindful of the tragic or triumphant events in our lives. This means we're not capsized at times of tragedy, and we also don't become greedy or slothful in prosperous times. However, this takes regular practice to achieve. For this reason, it's highly recommend that (*you*!) my readers devote 10-20 minutes to a daily meditation practice: I would personally recommend 'Headspace' and 'The Mindfulness App' in the App Store). This trained state of mind allows us to step out of our narrow self-focus, and gain a larger, wiser perspective. Here's to taking "*the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*" in our stride!

"I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened." **- Mark Twain**

It's important not to take ourselves too seriously! Most of our troubles are not life or death, although our bodies natural defense mechanism makes fight or flight. The human mind has developed a unique capacity for self-awareness and contemplation. It's true other intelligent animals, such as chimpanzees and dolphins have some form of *theory of mind*, which is the psychological term for imagining what other might be thinking. They can also recognize themselves in the mirror. But only in us humans has it developed to such as degree that we can consciously, *willfully*, step out of our natural animal conditioning, and choose a more rational response. The ability to actually be so aware that we can *train* ourselves to become more rational, make healthier and happier choices, and live calmer and more fulfilling lives.

No longer do we have to live in fear of being eaten (*most of us*, *anyway*). But nobody told our nervous system, so it's up to us as self-aware people to distinguish *real* threats (which are pretty rare in the developed world), from *imagined* threats (which are a common cause for needless suffering). Let's engage our distinctly human cerebral cortex – the executive part of our brain – in charge of being consciously aware and bringing balance to our inner impulses.

"A man who suffers before it is necessary, suffers more than is necessary." **– Seneca the Younger**

The word *restraint* is a very helpful for us to remember. This doesn't mean oppression, but instead reminds us not to *diffuse* our energy into acting out impulses, thoughts, and actions that will reliably leave us unsatisfied. Another guiding word can be *wholesome*. Perhaps asking yourself: "Is this a *wholesome* action?" It can also be useful to recognize that <u>everything has consequences</u> and asking "what emotional, physical, and mental consequences does [insert present state thought or action] create?" These

questions put us back into contact with what's real – the present moment. Only by being present and not running away from our fears can we hope to be free of them.

Perform Experiments in the Mind's Laboratory

The way to becoming the *engineer* of your own happiness is through experimentation! Life is about being confident enough to make mistakes *on purpose* in order to improve.

"I've failed over, and over, and over again in my life, and that is why I succeed." **– Michael Jordan**

Let's see how we can best begin *failing-forward*, taking life moment by moment, and starting again (and again) with enthusiasm, while learning from our mistakes.

Experimenting in the Mind Lab

Experimentation is the best way towards human progress. It's all very well reading this book and intellectually understanding its concepts, but until we test them in the real world, it's all just academic (useless). The only way we can measure in terms of CBT is through subjective awareness. This means we need to pay clear attention to how various situation are effecting us physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Attention is the most important quality of mind for you to train. Without attention we can often live confused and unhappy lives. Those who suffer most from alcoholism, substance abuse, or harmful personality habits, are those most unaware of the true repercussions of their actions. However, when we connect the dots, using journaling practices, a daily mindfulness practice, and begin to face our lives with courage and honesty, we see a true reflection of our actions and behaviors.

Behaviors and habits are by no means set in stone. Every adult human on the planet has changed radically from childhood, to adolescence, and eventually to adulthood. This book is a *call to action* to experiment with new and *better habits*. I understand many readers of this book will be suffering from some disturbing thoughts, which might bring feelings of shame or self-loathing. These readers in particular need to see the connection between running away from their obstacle (or their condition), and the negative reinforcement which results.

Negative Reinforcement

It's common for people suffering from disturbing intrusive thoughts to deny the existence of such thoughts. Many people reason that by *burying* a thought, or simply *chastising* ourselves for **automatically thinking it**, we will somehow *suppress* it from ever being acted upon. Unfortunately, this is misguided as to how the brain interprets these self-repressive behaviors. The act of negatively *chastising* ourselves for automatically thinking thoughts of violence, sexual misconduct, or compulsive self-destructive behavior, only increases our feelings of anxiety and fear. This creates a loop of negative reinforcement. Instead of thinking, "*that was a strange and disturbing thought*", and **letting it go**, people suffering with acute anxiety think "*I must suppress this thought otherwise I will act it out!*". On the surface, this skewed-logic appears to make sense. It's also a highly moralistic point of view. Surprisingly, anxious people usually have a *hyper*-moral relationship towards their behaviors, and harshly judge negative thoughts and disturbing feelings. How can this be? Well, it's been well documented that those who *really* will act out horrific or immoral behavior rarely *anxiously worry* themselves about it. They simply don't want to get caught, whether this be pedophiles, rapists, mass murders, kleptomaniacs, or any other serious offenders. Those who *panic or anxiously worry* about these things are acting in an ***opposite*** way to those who *actually* carry out such heinous acts. Therefore, take heart in the understanding that your *anxiety* is probably evidence for the fact that you're in truth a person who is very concerned about misconducts, and therefore very *unlikely* to commit a serious crime.

The practice of seeing an anxious thought, recognizing and labeling this type of thinking as a "*disturbing thought*" or "*anxious thinking*", *before* we add fuel to the fire and invest in thinking more about it. It also important not feel *synonymous* with these intrusive thoughts, or link them to our identity. This is the key to freeing ourselves from the negative reinforcement trap. We must be willing to face our fears *head-on* if we're to actively change our relationship to them. Therefore, next time this type of thinking occurs think **frame it** with a word ('*disturbing'*, for example) or phrase. This enables you to acknowledge the intrusive thought as just a thought – *nothing more* – and realizing the human brain is capable of thinking any possible though, cruel or kind. Once we've named it as, for

example, "*self-loathing*" or "*insecurity*", **do not engage** with it using *analytical* thinking. Instead, focus on the physical, bodily results this thought has, such as "*tense*" sensations in the body, or "*fast and shallow*" breathing. These negative thoughts decay and disappear under the light of awareness and with a little time and patience. They only grow strong and more influential in the darkness of fear and aversion to them. Next, notice how the negative thought instantly *mutates*, changes, and fades in and out of existence under our awareness. Repeat this process of bringing **non-attached attention** to intrusive thoughts, and make sure not to allow these thoughts *room to breathe* by overthinking the **imagined meaning** of them, or giving them unnecessary *air-time* in your consciousness. With discipline, repeat this process of giving **guarded but open** attention to intrusive thoughts. Overtime, and with persistent practice, the relationship cultivated towards these disturbing thoughts will be much healthier and allow for more freedom.

"Don't be bothered by thoughts; let them come, and let them go." **– Anagarika Munindra** (Buddhist teacher)

(This is simple, but not *easy*!)

Don’t Try to Figure It Out!

Anxiety has a natural tendency towards self-sabotage. The disturbing thought will appear as a ‘danger signal’ to your anxious brain (the amygdala), causing you to reflexively react and repeat the intrusive thought on a negative cycle. Anxiety is looking for threats, real or imagined, and cannot tell the difference between the two.

Anxiety acts like a bully and feeds off your reactions. Don’t feed this bully. Let the disturbing thought come and go, observing your thoughts from an *outsider* perspective. Remember, we’re **not** our thoughts. No more than we’re the digestion of our stomachs. These are both just processes happening within our bodies. One made up of electrical chemical signals in your brain. The other made up of chemical reactions in your gut. Don’t feel personally attached or synonymous with either. Just accept the as real, temporary, and cultivate or prune them skilfully whether they be healthy or unhealthy in nature.

This book is here to remind you ***“you’re not alone!”*** Many people experience intrusive thoughts on a daily basis that they disagree with rationally. The brain is capable of thinking **any** thought imaginable. But we have the power to train our brains to let go of unpleasant thoughts, and cultivate positive, healthy thoughts. Just because you think a cruel thought this doesn’t make you a cruel person. What matters is what’s acted upon and the consequences for human well-being. Thoughts can feel real, but they’re just movies in the mind without any substance outside your mind’s inner theatre. Train your mind not to overreact, invest in or identify with negative thoughts as “true”. Achieve this and you’ve won a major battle against anxiety!

Also, remember anxiety is there to help you. But it’s a stupid prehistoric system that can’t tell the difference between real and imagined threats. Thankfully, our rational prefrontal cortex can correct for these mistakes with a little consistent training. A neat little trick to convert anxiety from a negative state to positive state is to say to yourself: “*I’m excited right now, not anxious!*”. In psychological studies, this has proven to be far more effective than telling yourself to “calm down”, as this just reinforces the belief that this anxious feeling is bad and should be avoided. Instead embrace the feeling, explore the creativity of anxiety – start writing, or

painting, (go with the flow) – and experiment as an alternative with labelling *anxiety* as *excitement*.

(You’re becoming the *engineer* of your mind! Whoop!)

Being *the Mountain* for Family, Friends, Community, and Humanity

Picture a snow-capped mountain. The mountain is always changing depending on the weather, but it's always fundamentally itself. Some days it may appear serene against a clear blue sky. Others days, it appears ominous but defiant against an oncoming storm. No matter what happens, the mountain always remains stable and strong.

We must stand up to "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" just as the mountain does against the oncoming storm. We cannot flee from troubling thoughts and feelings, nor should we seek them out, but stand defiantly and outlast the temporary storm, strong in the knowledge that "*this too shall pass*". Mountain also provide shelter for those around them, shielding climbers from howling winds. To become like the enduring and protective mountain, we must accept and practice our CBT, meditative, and Stoic techniques.

These techniques are not only valuable for ourselves, but for everyone around us as well. Those who suffer with a particular condition have an opportunity to become a role model for others. Those closes to us will benefit most from the awe-inspiring way we rise up against fearsome thoughts and feelings, conditions and circumstances. Those closes to us will feel the benefit to new found strength immediately. Those in the community will feel the ripple effect of our fortitude and indomitable spirit.

These issues are part of the condition of being human. There's nothing inherently wrong, or beyond change about depression, anxiety, or intrusive thoughts. Once we understand the universal truth about the fragility, yet adaptability of our minds, we open the door to compassion. There are many

thousands of other suffering alongside us, but through adapting to these harsh conditions, we can begin to flourish in spite of them. Like a mountain range, or group of penguins huddling together against the blizzard, there is safety in numbers, as we shield each other from the worst of our internal or external winds.

Let Positivity Flow: Scheduling Pleasant Activities

Scheduling pleasant activities is a great way to stimulate positivity and make yourself feel better. Take a pen and paper and write down the seven days of the week. Next, plan a small healthy and pleasant activity for each day. It can be anything from reading a favorite book, walking in nature, or listening to music. Remember to give yourself a little treat for performing a positive habit, like eating a delicious healthy(*ish*) snack, or spending time with supportive and positive friends. After you have scheduled pleasant activities for the week, ensure to follow this plan. When you do it once, you will automatically become motivated to continue with the activity when you observe its positive effects on your mood.

Once the first week is over, plan more pleasant activities for the second week. This time, try scheduling three activities that give you a sense of accomplishment. These activities will boost self-confidence, helping you to become enthusiastic about setting new goals and building positive habits. Be sure to create a morning routine, which reinforces your new positive outlook. Search for “The Miracle Morning” by Hal Elrod to learn more.

Keep up to date with more work like this by sending your name and email address to everythingchangespublishing@outlook.com.

Never give up on the path to mental and emotional freedom!

Conclusion

This information is only useful when acted upon. Readers who have successfully made it to the conclusion stand a **great** chance of significantly improving their lives with these techniques and many others. Life is a marathon, not a sprint, and with ***sustained practice*** even the most suborn mental condition can be tamed.

Remember, **be *kind* to yourself**! Remember who you were 5, 10, or even 20+ years ago. In the present moment, resurrect and feel the joys and sorrows of the person you once were. Now, *take a deep breath*, and visualize yourself giving the former you some **useful and compassionate advice**. Send this good advice back through time and acknowledge their *gratitude*. Now come into the present and take a moment to ***thank yourself*** for your participation in this exercise. Imagine a future version of you in 10 years' time now giving you *their* best advice. Pause and reflect: *what would they be saying?* This is the voice of our better selves, who is always available to us in times of need.

Finally, if you've received value from this book, or believe it is worth a modest amount, please share your experience on Amazon.com! Simply leave a review by searching for the book "*Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: 7 Ways to Freedom from Anxiety, Depression, and Intrusive Thoughts*".

Take care!

Lawrence Wallace